National Alliance to End Homelessness

Joint Component Programs Show Promise in Responding to Unsheltered Homelessness

Research into Action | Project #5

Almost 10 years ago, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) began allowing Continuum of Care Program funds to be spent on Joint Component Transitional Housing/Rapid Re-Housing (TH-RRH). These programs are unique, in that they can offer unsheltered people facing multiple barriers short-term emergency housing followed by longer-term rental subsidies, with the support of services throughout. The model corrects shortcomings of historic transitional housing identified through research and practice, reducing barriers to participation, more thoughtfully tailoring services to participant needs, and ensuring pathways into permanent housing.

Under the Trump Administration, there have been efforts to invest more in transitional housing while drastically reducing the support for permanent housing programs, including Joint Component programs. HUD cites no evidence on the model to justify this turnaround. One *Research Into Action* team (Lynden Bond, PhD, Katharine Elder, and Anna Donate) surveyed and interviewed Joint Component program managers and direct service staff and conducted focus groups with participants. Their research found positives for participants and suggested opportunities for future study on post-program outcomes. Should the federal-level push for more transitional housing continue, much can be learned from Joint Component programs about the possibilities and benefits of pairing it with permanent housing.

Flexibly Tailored Supports Help People Transition from Unsheltered Homelessness to Housing

About one third of the 100 Joint Component projects surveyed by the researchers primarily serve people entering from unsheltered homelessness. Other programs served survivors of domestic violence (38%) or young people (29%), which could include people who had been unsheltered. Participants shared positive experiences about their time in Joint Component programs in interviews with the researchers. They appreciated having their own space, in sharp contrast with other temporary crisis housing that often does not provide this. They credited the model in helping them move into shelter or housing quickly with minimal barriers to entry. Throughout their time in the program, case managers provided services to help them meet their needs and achieve their goals, assisting with everything from obtaining identification cards to finding and applying for apartments.

Still, they ran up against the limits of flexibility. For example, the program can't pay for certain necessities like furniture. Some participants worried about their future beyond the two-year program time limit, feeling like more time would help overcome health, employment, and other challenges. Some staff also shared this concern about the ongoing stability of the people they had worked with during the program.

Joint Component Programs Serve a Distinct Role in Homelessness Response Systems

The end goal of these programs is to help people gain stable housing. How people get there is typically up to them:

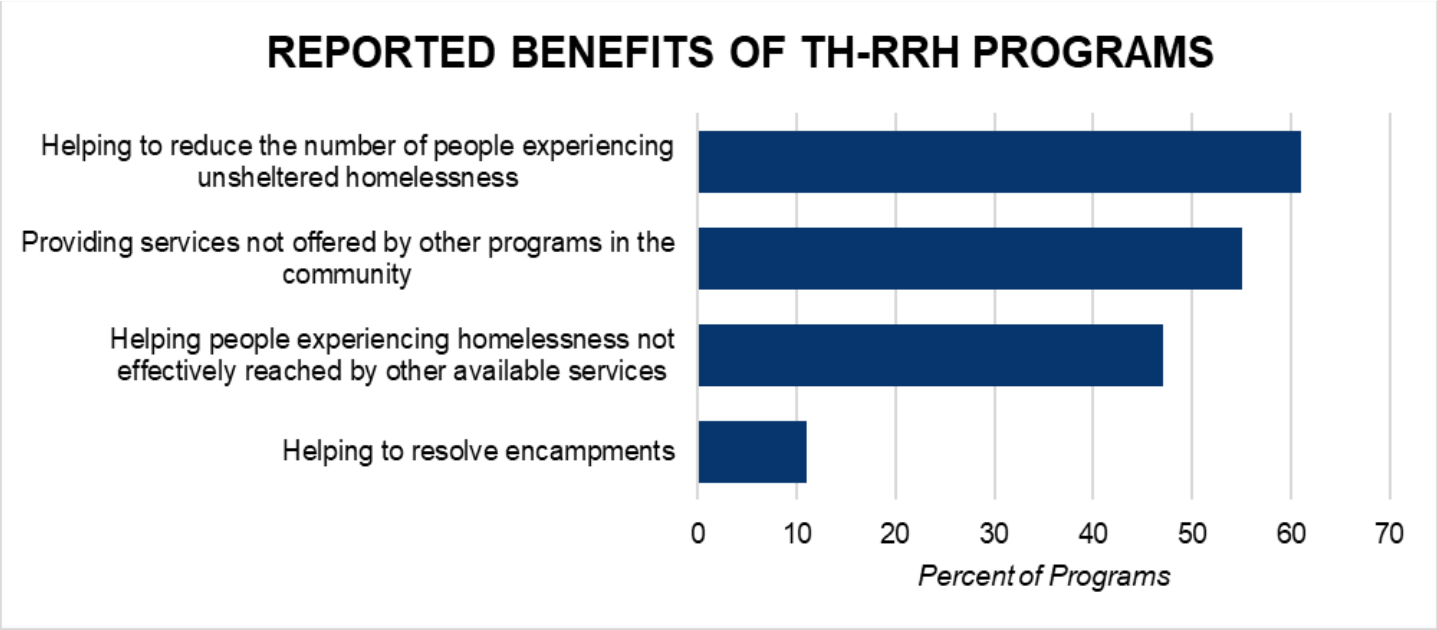
- People often (but do not have to) start in transitional housing. This most often looked like having a private room in a building that houses other program participants, although many programs also provided transitional housing through master leasing scattered-site units or making use of multiple structures. Services and amenities might be provided on-site.
- At some point, people start looking for their own housing. This is often a rental with their name on the lease. The program then helps the participant pay rent. The amount of the subsidy is often based on the household's income or declines over time.

In total, programs can assist people (in either or both settings) for up to two years. Survey respondents indicated that people tended to spend between three months to one year in transitional housing. Throughout their tenure, Joint Component programs offer supportive services to participants. Programs typically employ case managers and housing specialists to work with participants and then draw upon community partnerships to facilitate access to other services like substance use treatment and employment services (although this varies).

Either on their own, or in collaboration with their case manager, participants opt into services that meet their needs. One service provider interviewed by the researchers shared how important this aspect of choice is:

> "It's Housing First—that's what it is... Sobriety is not a requirement. Mental health [service participation] is not a requirement. However, we will connect you to services if you so wish... *One of the things we also find is if someone is stably housed, they're much more likely to accept other services.*"

Altogether, Joint Component programs are designed to adapt to people's needs. Perhaps because of that, most program representatives who responded to the survey agreed that these projects are "providing services not offered by other programs in the community" and are "helping to reduce the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness."



Implications: Research into Action

The Alliance identified ways this research could inform policy and practice:

- **Continue to Fund Joint Component Programs.** Most programs either offer short- or longer-term support; few do both. This research highlights the positive experiences of participants and the benefits of a streamlined hybrid approach, particularly for people who may have higher service needs like young adults, survivors of domestic violence, and people who have experienced unsheltered homelessness. Policymakers should continue to allow communities to receive funding for these programs and support them with more guidance and technical assistance. Researchers should continue to study these programs, including outcomes related to housing stability and overall well-being.
- **Continue to Apply Lessons Learned.** Research and experience informed the Joint Component model. A rigorous study of homeless services options found that transitional housing alone had no impact on long-term housing stability and self-sufficiency. Since these factors are central to ending homelessness, communities starting and developing transitional housing programs should pair them with solid pathways to permanent housing that are most likely to reduce returns to homelessness. As with many homeless services efforts, this may require securing funds from sources other than the federal government. Leaders can learn invaluable lessons from Joint Component programs, including those outlined in this study, when planning and funding local responses to unsheltered homelessness.
- **Communities that do not have Joint Component programs can learn and apply key takeaways from this research.** Three key principles stand out:
  - ***Uplifting Participant Choice and Voice:*** Participant choice in housing and services is paramount. Among survey respondents in this study, most providers serving adults said that "program users have the full right to choose what services they want to use." And most (about 60%) reported embedded participant feedback in their program design.
  - ***Reducing Barriers to Participation.*** Programs should remove barriers to entry and ongoing participation (such as by accommodating partners, pets, and belongings).
  - ***Focusing on Housing Stability:*** A fraction of adults leaving emergency shelters do so to stable housing. Emerging evidence on encampment response often finds similarly low rates of permanent housing access. Dedicated resources for this purpose — like help during the housing search process, payment of moving expenses, and short-term rental subsidies — can help people overcome barriers and find stability.
- **Housing affordability continues to pose significant challenges.** Structural deficiencies in the housing market make it harder for people to find suitable units. Program staff shared how inventory limits peoples' choices, and program participants expressed worries about their future. Landlord relationships and incentive programs can help address some of these barriers while people are in the program. However, the problem tends to be larger than can be feasibly solved by these measures and persists after people leave the program. Policymakers at all levels of government must focus on improving housing market conditions as part of their response to homelessness.

Learn more:
Read the full report, "Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness through the Joint Transitional Housing-Rapid Rehousing Program."
Read a fact sheet, "Joint Transitional Housing-Rapid Rehousing Programs in the United States: Key Findings from a National Survey."